

Krzysztof Ziarek*

The Avant-Garde and the End of Art

Modernism remains a complex and complicated term, contested not only with regard to its historical meaning or period boundaries but also with regard to its (continuing) relevance for aesthetics and, more broadly, for the contemporary understanding of art(s). This conceptual dilemma is in part due to modernism's implication within and sometimes uneasy relation to the historically and cognitively more capacious notion of modernity. Is modernism the culmination of modernity, its crowning moment, or perhaps its tipping point toward the purported postmodernity/postmodernism, or is the challenge, even revolution, instigated by modernism's artistic inventiveness—its avant-garde momentum—still extant and current beyond the apparent succession of modernism by postmodernism? In the opening sentence of *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno diagnoses modernism as radically calling into question the very existence and pertinence of art: "It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore, neither in it nor in its relation to the whole [zum Ganzen], not even its right to exist."¹ And even more poignantly a few sentences later: "It is uncertain whether art is still possible; whether, with its complete emancipation, it did not cut off and lose its own preconditions."² For Adorno, the uncertainty afflicting the very possibility of art's existence stems from what he sees as the fiasco of the avant-gardes: "The sea of the formerly inconceivable, on which around 1910 revolutionary art movements set out, did not bestow the promised happiness of adventure. Instead, the process that was unleashed consumed the categories in the name of that for which it was undertaken."³ In short, the avant-gardes were "too radical," as they eroded the very categories, chief among them the aesthetic notions of subjectivity, aesthetic experience, and judgment, that Adorno wants to redefine and yet preserve, in order to maintain art's critical relation to social antagonisms and suffering. Rejecting the "non-aesthetic" radicalism of Dadaists or of

67

¹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. R. Hullot-Kentor, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, 1, modified.

² *Ibid.*, 1, modified.

³ *Ibid.*

* Department of Comparative Literature, University of Buffalo, State University of New York

John Cage, Adorno looks instead to modernists like Kafka, Schönberg, or Beckett, in whose work he identifies a crucial, and socially significant, reconfiguration of the aesthetic conception of art, in which the subject no longer dominates its object and where form, through sedimenting dissonances and discords, exposes and denounces antagonisms inherent in modern society. In response to the suffering brought by modernity and epitomized in the figure of Auschwitz, art has to turn against its own affirmative essence, that is, against its creation of another world detached from and opposed to the empirical world. Through form, art transforms aesthetic categories while turning against “the status quo and what merely exists.”⁴ As the title of Adorno’s study indicates, one of art’s preconditions eroded by “revolutionary artistic movements” is precisely aesthetics; aesthetics as providing the framework for understanding the production, experience, and significance of artworks.

Though approaching the role of art in modernity through a different lens, Jacques Rancière can be seen to be, broadly speaking, in agreement with Adorno’s diagnosis of a new artistic paradigm in modernity, as he advances the idea of a crucial shift in the underlying structures of experience that he calls the aesthetic regime of art and identifies as significantly altering the distribution of the sensible in modernity. “In the aesthetic regime, artistic phenomena are identified by their adherence to a specific regime of the sensible, which is extricated from its ordinary connections and is inhabited by a heterogeneous power, the power of a form of thought that has become foreign to itself. [...]”⁵ Next to Adorno’s approach to aesthetics undertaken largely in the context of negative dialectics, Rancière’s articulation of the aesthetic regime of arts emphasizes the positive and political character of the changes made possible by the new distribution of sensibility prompted by it. Numerous differences between Adorno and Rancière aside, what their approaches have in common is the way in which they sideline the challenge posed to aesthetics by avant-garde invention. My supposition here is that this is the case because what the avant-garde puts into question and tries to leave behind is precisely the aesthetic approach to art, one of the preconditions for art’s existence in modernity articulated at the start of *Aesthetic Theory*.

68

⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. G. Rockhill, London and New York: Continuum, 2004, 22-23.

Yet the avant-garde impulse⁶ in modernism pushes even further, interrogating the very idea of art, that is, the understanding of (art)works as art to begin with. Although Adorno does not articulate the issue in these terms, his question about whether art is still possible at all after modernism gestures at the conditions in modernity that would continue to make art possible, or render it impossible, as art. In simple terms, why are there (art)works at all and why are these works constituted and conceived of as *art*; or, to put it differently, can there be (art)works that do not conform to (any) idea of “art”? And what would this non-art be without being simply commodity, object, or tool?

The question brought into the open by the avant-garde momentum in modernism is therefore twofold. First, is aesthetics a necessary and unavoidable precondition for art in modernity, as both Adorno and Rancière suggest in different ways? Second, and more paradoxically, is art itself, whether seen through the prism of the idea of art or as the plural of arts, another precondition for what perhaps we can no longer simply call (art)works without, however, merging them seamlessly with life, experience, action, or technology? Both Adorno’s disquiet about Dadaism and Cagean (non)aesthetics and Rancière’s re-inscription of the avant-garde into the aesthetic paradigm register the first side of this question and offer as a response different recalibrations of the aesthetic. At the same time, Adorno wants to counter what he sees as the erosion by the avant-garde of two crucial categories: humanity and freedom, and offers his transformed aesthetic theory to discover the contemporary preconditions for art’s continued existence. By contrast, Rancière finds in the redistribution of the sensible in art’s aesthetic regime a liberating and democratizing force, affirming art’s new role in modern life and society. Though differently, both Adorno and Rancière identify in broadly conceived modernist art and literature a critical transformative moment. Yet this transformation is said to happen explicitly as inaugurating the aesthetic regime of arts (Rancière) or a historically new aesthetic of form (Adorno), which means that, notwithstanding the changes it brings about, this transformation remains within the aesthetic horizon for the understanding of art.

69

On that point, it is Heidegger who offers a more radical approach, advocating not only the overcoming of aesthetics but even the possibility of freeing “art-

⁶ See my discussion of the avant-garde momentum in *The Force of Art*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004.

works” from the concept of art itself.⁷ While this may strike those unfamiliar with the full extent of Heidegger’s numerous remarks on art, aesthetics, and their entrenchment in the metaphysical thought as unexpected or surprising, Heidegger, without any consistent engagement with the avant-garde, except for his remarks on Klee and attested admiration for Celan’s radical and inventive poetic language, nonetheless confronts in his reflections on art, poetry, and language, precisely the twofold question raised by the avant-garde with regard to art and its prevalent aesthetic conceptualization. Though Heidegger’s texts on poetry and art engage predominantly with Romantic or modernist works, from Hölderlin to Rilke, George, and Trakl, his approach to language and especially his own practice of guiding his thinking through radical openings and transformations of German words and phrases correspond much more closely to his stated need for freeing artworks from being ensconced in the aesthetic paradigm.

In “The Origin of the Work of Art” and even more expressly in *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*, Heidegger declares the need to free our understanding and experience of the artwork from the aesthetic paradigm. “The question of the origin of the work of art is not intent on an eternally valid determination of the essence of the work of art, a determination that could also serve as a guideline for the historiological survey and explanation of the history of art. Instead, the question stands in the most intrinsic connection to the task of overcoming aesthetics, i.e., overcoming a particular conception of beings—as objects of representation. The overcoming of aesthetics again results necessarily from the historical confrontation with metaphysics as such.”⁸ For Heidegger, to account for the possibility of a transformative opening that presents itself with regard to art in modernity, it will not be enough to diagnose a paradigm shift in art, as in Rancière, or postulate a new aesthetics, as in Adorno, if such

70

⁷ Though on the surface, it seems that Adorno and Heidegger propose very different, aesthetic and non-aesthetic respectively, approaches to artworks, the relation not just between the two thinkers but also between their views on art is much more complex and admits of many proximities, which I cannot address here. For a more developed discussion of the intersections between Adorno’s and Heidegger’s approaches to art, see my discussion in *The Force of Art*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004, 9-17 and 29-36, and “Beyond Critique?,” in *Adorno and Heidegger: Philosophical Encounters*, eds. Ian Macdonald and Krzysztof Ziarek, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008.

⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*, trans. R. Rojcewicz and D. Vallega-Neu, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012, 396.

approaches do not break with the domination of the notion of beings and entities in the orientation of Western thought to the detriment of being and its event. Metaphysics, in Heidegger's characterization, describes a technician, productivist and manipulative in essence self-disclosure of reality as disposable resource, which orients experience, knowledge, and action in terms of availability and disposability of beings for processing, control, or use. Aesthetics for Heidegger is inescapably embedded in the division of being into subject/object, matter/form, and the sensible/intelligible, which makes the aesthetic conceptualization of art part and parcel of the Western metaphysical tradition. In "The Origin of the Work of Art," Heidegger proposes not to approach artworks as objects or beings, as artistically formed material, for instance, but instead through the prism of the event that takes place in art as its enactive and transformative work. This experience becomes oriented first and foremost by the changing vectors of one's emplacement within the world opened up from the artwork's event, vectors that can transform perception, knowledge, action, and judgment. As such, this experience—the working of the artwork—is not beholden or reducible to aesthetic-metaphysical categories (subject/object, matter/form) that are themselves indebted to the notion of constant and discrete yet related beings. Instead, it follows the morphing contours and interlinked pathways of the event, its futural momentum and possibilities it opens to decision. The encounter with the working of the artwork is initially neither a matter of *aisthesis*, and thus the sensible, nor of the intelligible: meaning, interpretation, critique. Rather, these all follow from the originary transformative impact of the event and need to be seen as coming from the event and understood from its inceptive, as Heidegger calls it, openness. It is not that artworks are not in some ways aesthetic objects, whose meaning is necessarily open to criticism, in interpretation and judgment, nor that they do not, as Rancière argues, introduce significant changes into the sensible and its distribution, but that these characteristics of the artworks, of their effects and the process of their reception, have come to shape our "aesthetic" relation to art to the detriment of the possibility of tracing in art a more originary event, whose force, when allowed by us to open, redispersed the very experience and sense of being. Beyond perception of and relation to beings, the artwork's event actuates the relatedness of the world as if anew each moment. It is the inceptual (*anfänglich*) force of the event's opening that can be encountered in the artwork and experienced in its resonance that transforms relations among beings, nonhuman and human.

From the perspective of Heidegger's critique of metaphysics, aesthetics operates essentially with regard to beings, thus neglecting and forgetting being and its finite, each time one-time event. What is more, the aesthetic understanding of art functions expressly with regard to human beings, framing the human-oriented experience of artworks in terms of sensibility, meaning, interpretation, on the one hand, or museum, market, and commodity, on the other. It is precisely this centralization and dominant role of the human being that needs to be called into question for the possibility of overcoming aesthetics. Intertwined with overcoming aesthetics is, for Heidegger, the paradoxical need to dislodge "art" and its works from the purchase that the very notion of art has on them. In posthumously published works, which contain Heidegger's most inventive and far-reaching proposals for art, he suggests on a couple of occasions the possibility that with the end of metaphysics, art could also come to an end. In his *Metaphysik und Nihilismus*, there is a section entitled "With metaphysics art ends as well,"⁹ while on the subsequent page one can find a remark that links thinking to "the art-free poetizing" (*die kunst-lose Dichtung*).¹⁰ The suffix "-los" indicates in this context clearly not an "artless," that is, clumsy and failed, poetry but rather a different sense of poetizing that breaches the envelope of art. This remark is reinforced by a couple of lines in *Über den Anfang* that, in the mode of supposition, suggest "Perhaps the last essence of poetry" and "perhaps the overcoming of all 'art,'" once again linking the notion of poetizing (*Dichtung*) with the possibility of seeing (art)works otherwise than art. In the later essay entitled "The Question Concerning Technology," Heidegger draws attention to the fact that ancient Greeks did not have a notion of art and did not experience or regard art in aesthetic terms. The term "art" is Latin and was introduced by the Romans, who thus invent the notion of art and the possibility of its subsequent aesthetic incarnations. The Greeks saw what later was distinguished as and separated into art as belonging instead to a broader sense of *techne*, which to Heidegger denotes an originary mode of knowing the world in its intrinsic openness, which allows one to create, make, or produce. In his numerous essays and remarks on *Dichtung*, Heidegger makes clear that at issue in this formulation is not poetry as a literary genre or as verse writing, but a dis-

72

⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Metaphysik und Nihilismus*, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 69, Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1999, 108.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 109.

¹¹ Martin Heidegger, *Über den Anfang*, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 70, Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2005, 167.

tinctive, non-aesthetic, and perhaps even non-art-like, that is, no longer fitting under the rubric of art, setting into the work of the event in its singular, one-time play of un/concealment. Such non-aesthetic works, free or released from art (*kunst-los*), and, therefore, perhaps no longer even to be labeled art-works, are *dichterisch*, poetic or poeitic. Analyzed through the prism of art's autonomy or separation from the social domain, the avant-garde's challenge to this separation is seen as leading to art's disappearance into the social fabric of occurrences and the eventual loss of artwork's distinctiveness, power, and influence.

Though undeveloped, Heidegger's remarks about the possibility of art-free "poetizing" (*Dichtung*) suggest that what can perhaps be called avant-garde "event-works," although no longer "art" strictly or aesthetically speaking, do not simply melt seamlessly into the political, the social, or the commercial. For Heidegger, seen poetically, (art)works are neither simply autonomous from nor dependent on and conditioned by the socio-empirical world but instead inaugurate transformatively and redispense, through the inceptiveness characteristic of the event, their world and the vectors for the diffusion of their force. In this perspective, the avant-garde works are not concerned with the autonomy or heteronomy of art, or simply with social statement or political action, but instead with enacting the inceptive force of art buried under ages of aesthetic conceptualization and unrecognizable among artistic formulas, styles, or fashions. The end of art, signaled in their respective ways by the avant-garde and Heidegger, does not mean the disappearance of artworks but instead the foregrounding of the event-works characteristic of the avant-garde art and writing.

Even though Heidegger does not speak directly to modernist aesthetics or avant-garde works, and seems to misjudge abstraction in art by seeing in it an uninterrogated extension of technics, it is not an accident that Lyotard, borrowing Heidegger's term *das Ereignis*, underscores the link between the event and the avant-garde, especially evident for him in the avant-garde challenge to the idea of grasping thought, that is, to conceptual, determinative thinking. Writing in *The Inhuman* about Barnett Newman's painting in the perspective of the question of the event, articulated by Lyotard as the question "Is it happening?," he remarks: "Letting go of all grasping intelligence and of its power, disarming it, recognizing that this occurrence of painting was not necessary and is scarcely foreseeable, a privation in the face of *Is it happening?* guarding the occurrence 'before' any defense, any illustration, and any commentary, guarding before be-

ing on one's guard, before 'looking' [*regarder*] under the aegis of *now*, this is the rigour of the avant-garde. In the determination of literary art this requirement with respect to *Is it happening?* found one of its most rigorous realizations in Gertrude Stein's *How to Write*.¹² What Lyotard identifies as the rigor of the avant-garde is the poetic rigor that Heidegger sees as more nimble and exacting in its idiomatic way than the grasping, conceptual power of logic and rationality. Such poetic rigor is required for thinking capable of responding to and guarding, as Lyotard puts it, the event. From the conjunction between Heidegger and Lyotard, two important points arise with regard to understanding the import of the avant-garde momentum in the wider context of modernism: first, its poetic, non-conceptual rigor, irreducible to aesthetic categories; second, the non-human (Heidegger) or inhuman (Lyotard) resonance of the event. The rigor that Lyotard identifies in Stein's *How to Write*, a text expressly on the avant-garde transformation of literary writing, recalls the poetic strength of the thinking of the event, which Heidegger signals in the subtitle of *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)* with regard to philosophical writing. This rigor pertains to the non-human event, thus reorienting the avant-garde work beyond the human and the human-centered understanding of language and experience. In different ways, both Heidegger and Lyotard link the rigor they are after to the non-human: Heidegger shows how the determination of the human comes from the non-human *Da-sein*, which, as the morphing site of relation to being, needs to be taken on as a task by human beings; Lyotard distinguishes between two kinds of the inhuman: one as the dehumanizing inherent in the over-rationalized systems of modernity, the other as the cosmic or worldly inhuman complexity—and its event—in which human beings arise over and over again. The link between the rigor of poetic thinking and the in-human skein of the event constitutes the distinctiveness of the avant-garde works amidst the modernist aesthetic.

74

This distinction can be also brought out by juxtaposing Adorno's and Lyotard's comments on the avant-garde. When Adorno expresses his worry about the preconditions for the existence of art in and after modernism, he identifies humanity and freedom as chief among these preconditions, and more specifically the link that makes humanity the bearer of freedom. In Lyotard, the letting go of grasping intelligence in the name of the event implies a different, non-human

¹² Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, trans. G. Bennington and R. Bowlby, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991, 93.

sense of freedom, in which human beings participate but which they do not simply bear or own. This non-human or dishumanized scope of freedom is elaborated more expressly and extensively in Heidegger's writings, and is foregrounded especially in texts dealing with the event and Da-sein. It is at least in part because of this uncoupling of freedom and humanity that Adorno criticizes the avant-garde in the name of a modernist aesthetic that, offering a revised notion of subjectivity, reimagines (the absence of) freedom. This is why the issue of in/human freedom can be one way to think about the tear, if not bifurcation, between modernism and the avant-garde.

The dishumanization of freedom, its recalibration with regard to the event and its complex happening, pivots on language and the possibility of its poietic rigor. In this perspective, the avant-garde can be seen as a debate with, perhaps even a polemic against, modernism that takes place within modernism itself. By "within" I mean that this polemic does not simply leave the ground of modernism and its aesthetic behind but instead dis-places the artwork with regard to the event and the inhuman. In modernity, the artwork is already part of what perhaps could be called the technological inhuman and its dehumanizing effects. The radicalization inherent in the avant-garde breaches this humanizing-dehumanizing dialectic in order to foreground how this dialectic is already enveloped by the dishumanizing momentum of the event-work. To trace in this perspective the branching off of the avant-garde within modernism, I examine briefly the question of poietic rigor in Gertrude Stein and Wallace Stevens. Though Stevens is a much more "traditional" and "modernist" poet, at least when compared to the "avant-garde" Stein, the rethinking of poetic language and experience he undertakes in his poems struggles precisely to point language beyond human "feeling" and "meaning," as "Of Mere Being"¹³ puts it. A modernist aesthete preoccupied with the question of the imagination and the poetic shaping of the world, on the one hand, Stevens, as early as "The Snow Man," makes poetry responsive to the inhuman event, in this case, the eventuation of the wintry landscape. It is this kind of event that breaks the aesthetic framework of poetry and art and gestures toward the need to reconceive (art)works as no longer "merely" art. Stein's still challenging "masterpieces" are, I would argue, perhaps the most radical re-writing of literature beyond the idea of art. They not only disclose the

¹³ Wallace Stevens, *The Palm at the End of the Mind: Selected Poems and Play*, ed. Holly Stevens, New York: Random House, 1967, 398.

avant-garde momentum of modernism but also give it a force whose resonance cannot be delimited by the logic of literary periodization.

The poietic rigor emblematic of the avant-garde is present in Stevens most often discursively or thematically. At the same time, it is not simply a topic of reflection, but, in parallel with the nearly omnipresent preoccupation with the imagination, translates into his practice of writing. Stevens' poems frequently read either as an extended image, a narrative description, or a theoretical deliberation, a kind of discourse, set in verse. This practice makes possible a running commentary on poetry and poetic imagination that is meshed together with described situations or images. Beyond the idiom of self-reflexivity, this way of writing serves to point out precisely the moments when the conventional aesthetic language of poetry is pushed to its limits, finding itself, as it were, "at the end of the mind."¹⁴ It is in this liminal zone that the poetic rigor at stake in my analysis can possibly come into play. In "The Snow Man," the human mind must turn into "the mind of winter," shedding and silencing the human concerns and desires, in order to allow the poetic listening to emerge through the aesthetic modes of signification. The poet becomes a listener and poetic writing turns into the practice of listening that envelops perceptions and thoughts so that one does not think "Of any misery in the sound of the wind," leaves, and the land.¹⁵ "Misery" is both named and unnamed in the same word: named in the language that is already humanizing the landscape, it is simultaneously exposed precisely in its distortive humanizing overlay and thus emptied out, opening onto the triple sense of "nothing" mentioned in the last stanza. The listener, no longer simply human, becomes nothing itself that beholds everything that is there to see, including the nothingness pervading the scene. The complex process of un/naming "nothing" listens not only to the landscape but also to the language in which it takes place. When the poem refers to "nothing that is not there," suggesting the listener's openness to everything that is to be listened and attended to, "nothing" has to appear in its all-inclusiveness without any articles, and when in the next phrase Stevens names "the nothing that is," the definite article as though confirms that paradoxical existence of "the nothing" as something that can be "definitely" named. The poem triangulates the naming among the listener as nothing, nothing that is not there, namely everything, and the nothing that is

76

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 398.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 54.

there. In this way, Stevens fleshes out the nothing named in the last instance as pulsing through “nothing that is not there,” that is, through everything, including the poet/listener. Like “misery” earlier in the poem, “nothing” both names “everything” and unnames it into nothingness characteristic of temporal occurrence. One can recall as well in this context “the giant of nothingness” from “A Primitive Like an Orb,”¹⁶ “A vermilioned nothingness” from “Less and Less Human, O Savage Spirit,”¹⁷ or even more poignantly the air in “A Clear Day and No Memories” that is emptied of everything and knows only nothingness.¹⁸ Poietic rigor means here attentiveness to how and what language, in the gesture of naming, opens up and lets be, and does so specifically in the manner that unveils, without misery or pathos, the nothing that holds together existence. It is instantiated through a complex negotiation of naming and unnamings, which in “The Snow Man” becomes extended into the three instances of “nothing,” as if Stevens were slowing down the process and taking us through the interrelated steps of the poietic rigor, having language listen to the elusive turning of “nothing,” still resonant even in the proliferating names and images.

This nothing transpires as the self-emptying of names with its double, simultaneously humanizing and dishumanizing, gesture. In “The Snow Man,” the winter landscape becomes the landscape of the mind and, more important, of language that unfolds in its poietic rigor of listening. Its event consists in a specific and difficult naming that unnames itself precisely for the sake of what might be called the inhuman. This self-annulling naming brings language into the liminal state, which Stevens calls the end of the imagination or the end of the mind. In this liminality, language opens beyond the human meaning and feeling onto the “plain sense of things.”¹⁹ Stating that it is both necessary and required, Stevens is well aware that this end or absence of imagination has itself to be imagined, that is, it remains a matter of language. At issue, though, is writing that, fully aware of the human capacity to imagine and color reality, has language name at the very end of the imagination, that is, in a way that lets the inhuman and the nothing envelop and place the human. This complicated and radical gesture is strikingly marked in the last line from “Of Ideal Time and Choice,” where it

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 320.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 265.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 397.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 382.

is “The inhuman making choice of a human self.”²⁰ The choice here concerns how “to be without a description of to be,” to cite a line from “The Latest Freed Man.”²¹ This choice involves, even requires, human participation, specifically trying to bring language to the end of the mind, yet it is made or decided by the inhuman. Being without a description of to be indicates not a mute, thoughtless attitude, but a difficult attentive participation, whose openness to the future is signaled twice by the use of the infinitive “to be.” What is more, the infinitive resonates and intertwines both the active sense associated with deciding how to be and the infinite implied in the “giant of nothingness.” The same use of the infinitive, again linked to the question of naming, occurs in “Notes Toward A Supreme Fiction,” when Stevens writes, “The sun / Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be / In the difficulty of what it is to be.”²² To be without a description of to be becomes possible, as “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” again insists by saying “It is possible, possible, possible. It must / Be possible,”²³ at the end of the mind. There, beyond the last thought, poetry not only discloses freedom as more than human but returns freedom to the play of the inhuman.

Tracing how the poetic rigor disclosed by Stevens at the end of the imagination restores the human to its inhuman play shows that the avant-garde momentum can be in play even in a more conventional, non-avant-garde modernist writing, whose discourse is still invested in aesthetics and in the post-Romantic deliberation on the imagination and its relation to reality. Stevens’ work illustrates the deliberation and deliberateness that marks the span of modernist aesthetic, reaching back at least as far as Romanticism while also being laced with the avant-garde inventiveness.

If Stevens both illustrates and deliberates on the poetic rigor, Stein’s writings are a multifaceted attempt to have language follow the contours of the event. This is evident especially on the level of the sentence, which for Stein becomes event-like, less a grammatical structure than an enactment. This is why “A sentence is not a picture”²⁴ oriented by meaning that is to be experienced or interpreted. Instead, a sentence in Stein strives primarily to be attuned to the chang-

78

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 301.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 166.

²² *Ibid.*, 208.

²³ *Ibid.*, 230.

²⁴ Gertrude Stein, *How to Write*, Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 2000, 172.

ing mode and force of “intense existence.” For Stein, it is not just that sentences have “wishes as an event” but, more decisively, only language events merit the name of sentences: “This is a sentence if it is an event.”²⁵ Such events are guided not by grammatical, let alone aesthetic, propriety, but by a play of transfers and transitions. They are enactments of the between spanning the relatedness intrinsic to the morphing event: “What is a sentence. A sentence is a beginning with when they are at home with a transaction transition transfer and between.”²⁶

Toward that end, Stein’s writing declines habitual or traditional scaffolding of literary texts, whether prose or poetry, so that it eschews narrative, plot, description, characters, images, and conventional grammatical structures securing signification and meaning. When repetition or alliteration appear, these devices contribute to the overall sense of the movement of Stein’s texts, with the impression that it is language that moves, acts, and instantiates. The idiomatic character of this writing has to do with directing, coaxing, or pleasuring the reader with the task of transforming our very relation to language. Stein’s disappointment with the noun is reminiscent of the quandary of Stevens’ “Man on the Dump” of poetic images: “I hope now no one can have any illusion about a noun or about the adjective that goes with the noun.”²⁷ Signifying things with a view to grasping them, nouns and names block the “intense existence” of things, as Stein calls it. In *How to Write*, she even writes “A noun is always a sacrifice.”²⁸ It is clear that her writing generalizes the designation “noun” to refer to any being or entity that can be brought to stand in a name: “A noun is the name of anything. [...] A noun is a name of everything.”²⁹ Or, “A word is a noun.”³⁰ That is why in *How to Write*, she repeatedly indicates the need not to introduce nouns into her sentences: “A noun should never be introduced into a sentence,” or “A noun is the name of anything and therefor it should not be without doubt therefor it should not be in a sentence unless easily easily in in have have lean to so that leaving out without doubt a noun out without doubt they were left to have it looked for with implication.”³¹

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 154.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 160.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 125.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 138.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 195.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 157.

Since these declarations are made obviously with the use of nouns, nouns referring to or describing the function of nouns, it becomes clear that the notion of the language sign has become fluid or tender, as the title *Tender Buttons* implies. The noun, and by extension any name or word, come to refer not to lexical categories but instead to items in the vocabulary of conceptual thought which *How to Write* sets out to undo for the sake of a new poetic rigor. Stein's question, "Was there not a way of naming things that would not invent names, but mean names without naming them"³² indicates, therefore, the attempt to release poetic language from the dominion of grasping intelligence and to instantiate a non-grasping poetic rigor, which Lyotard finds to be characteristic of the avant-garde. Toward that end, grammar and vocabulary, which expressly preoccupy Stein in *How to Write*, become also transformed in a parallel way. Stein's characteristic sentences dispense almost entirely with punctuation, in order to open themselves to syntactical ambiguity, hesitant or undecidable subordination, or even entertain grammatical mistakes and run-on sentences. Parts of speech lose their discriminating features, as verbs, nouns, and adjectives fluctuate between multiple possibilities, as though refusing to close sentences and instead holding them open to the play of possibilities. Similarly, grammatical phrases also lose their determination and often shift categories between the nominal, the verbal, or the adverbial. Articles, prepositions, and even conjunctions frequently gain the resonance conventionally delimited to nouns or verbs. Clauses become spliced, creating possibilities for new, non- or more than grammatical, that is, grammatically correct, syntactical structures. The fluidity and excess characteristic of such Steinian sentences register the poetic momentum of the event, which does not cease to open to the future.

80

This brief characterization of how Stein writes and encourages writing illustrates the avant-garde's radical push not only to overcome aesthetics but, more daringly, to prompt the end of art. If as Heidegger remarks, art ends with metaphysics, than the ending of the noun and the name as we know, them which is clearly at issue in Stein's writings, means also breaking with the metaphysical grasp of being through the prism of beings or entities, with their corresponding names and definitions, or "nouns," to echo Stein. It is in this sense that Stein and by extension the avant-garde impulse in modernism creates works that do not fit

³² *Ibid.*, 139.

easily under the conceptual umbrella of “art,” and that could perhaps be more fittingly described through the prism of the poetic (*dichterisch*) as event-works.

In the metaphysical perspective, modernism can be seen to extend art’s lease on life, both as a concept and as an aesthetic paradigm and practice, while the avant-garde, positioned both within and against modernism, spells the end of art for the sake of an art-free, poetic event-work. Against the backdrop of this rift, one could say that Stein’s avant-garde writing is intensely engaged in its practice with the poetic, staging and enacting it almost at every turn of the phrase, while the modernist Stevens uses aesthetic paradigms and reflection to trigger the liminal state at the end of the imagination or the mind. Modernism and the avant-garde inhabit the same historical moment yet part ways with regard to aesthetics. As the avant-garde elaborates its poetic rigor in order to work in tune with the non-human reach of the event, it moves beyond the metaphysical determination of art and aesthetics. In the avant-garde, what is ‘proper’ to humankind comes to be “inhabited by the inhuman,” to paraphrase Lyotard,³³ and is “celebrated” as such. This fissure means also that the momentum of the avant-garde extends beyond the historical boundaries of, for many already closed, chapter of modernism. Its force continues to challenge and displace the anthropic binds of art and aesthetics.

³³ Lyotard, 2.